



Chairman Robert Aderholt

*Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and
Drug Administration, and Related Agencies
House Committee on Appropriations*

Hearing on USDA's Role in Disaster Recovery Opening Statement As Prepared November 29, 2017

Good morning. Today we want to welcome officials from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to discuss USDA's role in disaster recovery. We will also assess the Department's needs for a third supplemental appropriations bill. The Administration's supplemental request submitted to Congress on November 17th included almost \$1 billion for USDA, not including funds requested for the Forest Service. To discuss this request and USDA's activities, we are pleased to have with us this morning Dr. Robert Johansson, Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation and Chief Economist; Mr. Steve Peterson, Acting Administrator of the Farm Service Agency; and Mr. Leonard Jordan, Acting Chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria have absolutely devastated parts of Texas, Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. Hurricanes Harvey and Irma are estimated to *each* have caused between \$42 and \$65 billion in property damage, and Hurricane Maria is expected to be even higher. Other areas of our country have been grappling with drought, floods, wildfires, and other natural disasters. When America's farmers, ranchers, rural communities, and those who depend on USDA's nutrition programs, are impacted by weather disasters, USDA is able to utilize existing authorities to begin assisting those most severely impacted.

We appreciate USDA's recent efforts to assist farmers and ranchers through crop insurance and other emergency disaster and conservation programs. For those in need of nutrition assistance, USDA has partnered with our nation's food banks and others to provide food and has worked with State Agencies to implement Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs, or D-SNAP, to help affected households get nutrition assistance benefits. USDA's Rural Development staff have been working with various partners to restore power, improve water quality, help people find temporary housing, and they continue to work with borrowers to assist in recovering from the financial hardships.

Thankfully USDA has resources and flexibility to begin operating these programs when disaster strikes. While Congress has already provided over \$51 billion to assist those impacted by the storms, we know from our constituents and colleagues that unprecedented needs remain, the response can strain USDA's resources, and additional funds and resources may be needed to get things back to the way they were before the storms.

For example, the Governor of Texas has submitted a request for \$61 billion; the Governor of Puerto Rico has asked for \$94 billion; and the Governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands is seeking nearly \$7 billion. The Florida delegation has submitted a letter to the Administration describing \$2.5 billion in damage to Florida's agriculture sector, including more than \$760 million in losses to the citrus industry. We know there is extensive fruit loss and tree damage that may need to be addressed.

With regards to the possibility of providing any additional assistance for crop losses, it is my intention to take a methodical approach to the issue. First, we will look at the USDA's preliminary estimates of economic losses in the agriculture sector. Secondly, we will exam how much estimated assistance USDA or private insurance companies will provide under existing programs like crop insurance. Finally, we will look at the net loss to see the economic impact. We will take these factors into consideration as Congress moves to draft its supplemental funding package. I also hope to discuss some ways that this can be accomplished, if it is deemed necessary.

Dr. Johansson, I want to thank Secretary Perdue for loaning you to us today. I understand that any numbers you provide here today are based upon the best estimates you have at your disposal. It is still too early to finalize the actual damage that has been done. I would ask all Members of the Subcommittee to take this into account during their questions.

We look forward to discussing the actions USDA has already taken to help farmers, ranchers, and rural communities as well as USDA's role moving forward so we can help rebuild, replant, and restore hope for American's coping with the losses each and every day. Again, we appreciate all of you being with us today.

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